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Into the blue

Dip into pristine diving and simple pleasures on Turks and Caicos' tranquil Out Islands

by JOSEPHINE MATYAS • February 2012

"It's Sunday night in the nation's capital!" whoops guitarist Mitch Rolling, as his rake 'n' scrape band kicks into high gear on the oceanfront patio of the Osprey Beach Hotel on Grand Turk. Mitch and his crew play with joyful abandon and there's a sense of community as visitors settle in and share a few pints with the locals. At the small tables the conversation is single-minded: people primarily come to out-of-the-way Grand Turk to snorkel and scuba dive. They're comparing notes about water clarity, bottom time, shark, turtle and stingray sightings.

Mitch came to Grand Turk three decades ago, a teenager angling for work in a dive shop. Now, this place has its hooks into him. His daytime gig is as dive master of his own outfit — Blue Water Divers — one of four such operations on the island. And here's the thing: Mitch is just one of many islanders who stopped for a visit, planted roots and are now part of the offbeat, funky Grand Turk community. Most of them will tell you they've stayed to take every opportunity to dip into the gin-clear, warm water, teeming with sea life. Grand Turk is consistently ranked among the best dive destinations in the world and the people who live here can hardly wait to share it with other divers and snorkellers.

REEF MADNESS

Grand Turk and Salt Cay are two of the Out Islands of the Turks and Caicos chain, an archipelago that curves south of Bahamas, straddling the seam between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Most visitors flock to the heavily developed, main island of Providenciales (nicknamed Provo), completely oblivious to the Old World charms and relaxed pace of the Out Islands. Many fewer take the extra step and hop an inter-island flight to Grand Turk or Salt Cay, remote outposts where nature still trumps development and flip-flops are de rigueur.

These Out Islands draw dedicated water lovers like filings to a magnet. It's the incredible proximity to pristine wall diving, plus coral reef snorkelling just a few fin kicks from shore that

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THE WAY TO THE CAY



puts its head and shoulders above most other Caribbean destinations. Dazzling white-sand beaches gently slope to around 10 metres in depth, frequently interspersed by rock and vibrant reef formations.

Then, just 300 metres off shore, the necklace of coral reef plunges dramatically into the 2100-metre Columbus Passage, with the most active reef zones from nine to 18 metres. This trench of unfathomable proportions is home to the famous “Wall,” a bucket-list destination for many of the experienced divers who seek heart-stirring excursions on the vertical sides of the reefs.

Grand Turk has more than 40 permanently moored dive sites located in the environmentally protected Columbus Landfall Marine National Park along the calmer, leeward side of the island. Corals find the perfect habitat here: water that is clear and shallow enough that light penetrates, gentle currents, plus an ideal temperature range and salinity. And the secret to attracting great fish is to have healthy corals — colonies that house and support a kaleidoscope of fish. Underwater it's an Alice in Wonderland landscape, home to sea fans waving in sensuous rhythm with the sea, bulbous brain coral, pillar coral, along with pufferfish, parrotfish, cowfish, squirrelfish and squid darting about their daily business.

WHERE DONKEYS ROAM

On neighbouring Salt Cay (50 minutes by ferry, nine minutes by air), dive master Tim Dunn has set up shop on a speck of land where his family roots go back centuries, to the early days when Salt Cay was among the world's largest producers of salt. An early form of green technology, the salt industry of the 1700 and 1800s relied on the power of wind, sun and the tides. There was enormous wealth in the commodity once known as “white gold.”

“Basically, we're on an underwater mountain range,” says Tim, explaining how in the space of just a few hundred metres the drop at the Columbus Passage goes from a moderate paddling depth to twice the height of the CN Tower. His new venture, **Crystal Seas Adventures** (crystalseasadventures.com), offers scuba diving, snorkelling, whale watching and outings to Gibbs Cay to see southern stingrays in the wild.

Salt Cay shines with a rustic charm and deep sense of community. Spend a day on this island of 65 residents (and twice as many free-roaming donkeys) and you'll soon be on a first-name basis with most everyone. The island is for people looking for the Old Caribbean and who are happy with seclusion; who want a village rather than a resort, who'll be happy to see donkeys walking dirt laneways lined with traditional salt-raker cottages. Excitement on the landside of Salt Cay is bingo night at Porter's Island Thyme bistro. The top-watt excitement sits under the water's surface.

For snorkellers, Salt Cay is a dream come true: reef sites like Turtle Gardens and Point Pleasant sit steps from shore; home to reef sharks, hawksbill turtles, conch, iridescent blue damselfish, silly-looking honeycomb cowfish and jaunty sergeant majors. Forests of staghorn and elkhorn coral are teeming with tropical fish — the formations close to the surface and subject to the pounding of the surf took a battering from recent storms and hurricanes, but things are coming back: the soft corals and the fish populations provide splashes of colour and movement.

THE AMAZON UNDERWATER

The tiny island is also the best vantage point from which to see the migrating humpback whales, as they pass through the deep Columbus Passage to winter in tropical waters for mating and calving. January through April is prime season for the humpbacks — it's possible to spot the whales as they breach and slap their tails on the surface. Lucky divers have even shared the same patch of water with the gentle giants.

In terms of biodiversity, these coral reefs are the equivalent of tropical rainforests — they are home to more than a quarter of the planet's fish species and the barrier reefs that ring islands protect shorelines from erosion and storm damage. The reefs around these Out Islands have suffered some damage from the rising temperature of the sea and from the battering of major blows like Hurricane Ike, a category 4 storm that crashed across Grand Turk and Salt Cay in late 2008. The breakage is most evident in the forests of elkhorn coral that sit close to the surface. Less so in the deeper reef sites.

To protect and preserve these fragile ecosystems, the locals formed the non-profit Turks and Caicos Reef Fund to install and maintain dive site moorings, operate the Blue Flag eco-label beach program and restore a major snorkel trail off Providenciales. Responsible dive operators, including **Blue Water Divers** (bluewaterdivers.com) and Crystal Seas Adventures have a policy of not feeding the wildlife so as not to manipulate the natural feeding cycle of creatures like fish and stingrays.

Air Canada (tel: 888-247-2262; aircanada.com) and **WestJet** (tel: 888-937-8538; westjet.com) serve the main island of Providenciales from Toronto and Montreal. Connections to the Out Islands are by small plane with Caicos Express (tel: 649-941-5730; caicosexpressairways.com) or **Air Turks & Caicos** (tel: 649-946-4999; flyairtc.com). Return rates from Providenciales begin at \$140 to Grand Turk and \$170 to Salt Cay. (All prices are in US dollars).

WHERE TO STAY

There are no high rises or all-inclusives on Grand Turk or Salt Cay. Accommodations are in inns, guesthouses and cottage rentals.

Operated by two Canadian sisters, **Manta House** (tel: 649-946-1111; grandturk-mantahouse.com) is a funky, comfortable guesthouse of three self-contained bungalows in the heart of Grand Turk directly across from the oceanfront. In winter, daily room rates start at \$130; weekly rates for cottages for two start at \$1100 and for six from \$2100.

On the beach directly across from several Grand Turk dive shops, the **Osprey Beach Hotel** (tel: 649-946-2666; ospreybeachhotel.com) is a favourite with divers. Twenty-seven rooms are outfitted with efficiency or full kitchens. Winter rates start at \$100.

White Sands Beach Resort (tel: 239-465-4265; whitesandsbeachresortci.com) is close to the Grand Turk cruise ship terminal, with its shops and restaurants. It has 16 one-bedroom condos. Daily rates from \$140 in the high season.

There are fewer options on tiny Salt Cay, but many cottage rentals can be coordinated through **Porter's Island Thyme** (tel: 649-946-6977; islandthyme.tc). Nightly rates in high season start at \$130 for the Beach House to \$265 for the Castaway Cottage on secluded and stunning North Beach. Weekly rates available.

WHAT TO EAT

Conch is served everywhere — including cracked conch, conch fritters, Creole conch and conch curry. You'll find excellent meals at the very casual Sandbar Restaurant, jutting out over the water in Grand Turk and at Pat's Place or Porter's Island Thyme on Salt Cay. Expect to pay about \$15 for a lunch of cracked conch.

The **Turks & Caicos Tourist Board** (turksandcaicostourism.com) website lists travel information for exploring the chain of 30 islands and cays.

FEBRUARY 2012:

They call Salt Cay “the island that time forgot.” Together with Grand Turk, the people here welcome visitors and they’re eager to show you how captivating off-the-beaten-path can be. But make no mistake about it, these slivers of paradise still pulse to the natural rhythms of the sea.

This article was accurate when it was published. Please confirm rates and details directly with the companies in question.

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